

## LIVELIHOODS, DEVELOPMENT, AND ECO-COSMOLOGY IN YUNNAN, PR CHINA: PERSPECTIVES OF AN ETHNIC HANI MAN

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### ABSTRACT

Based on fieldwork in China's Yunnan Province, this essay follows Mr. Wang, an ethnic Hani man from Ruili, a lowland town bordering Myanmar, where he worked for Mr. Zhou, a Han Chinese businessman, to his mountain village in Yuanyang, where he farms. I first describe how Zhou's risky economic schemes in Ruili led to conflicts that induced Wang to return to his mountain village. Second, I consider how development processes such as road construction may impact livelihoods and cosmology in Wang's mountain village. I employ a descriptive ethnographic style but make two analytical points. First, the essay highlights how power and resources are sometimes unequally distributed between lowland Han Chinese and highland ethnic minority people in Yunnan. Second, it suggests materials used in ritual worship may serve as mnemonics that, for highland ethnic Hani villagers, present cultural and ecological pasts in the face of current ecological and social transformations.

### KEYWORDS

Yunnan, Hani, livelihoods, development, cosmology

It is hot here in the valley, with the thermometer in the car reading thirty-seven degrees Celsius. I am riding with three ethnic Hani<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Numbering 1.7 million (<https://unc.live/2Yy9x9F> 2 September 2021), the Hani are one of China's fifty-six recognized ethnic groups. They are believed to be descendants of people, who migrated southward from the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau prior to the third century CE. Today, more than ninety percent of China's Hani live in Yunnan Province. Hani groups also live in Laos, Vietnam, eastern Myanmar, and northern Thailand. The

men in a car alongside the Honghe 'Red River' as it cuts through the valley here in Yuanyang County of Yunnan's Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture before entering northern Vietnam. The Red River gets its name from the red soil sediments it carries. But as sediments have accumulated due to dam building upriver, the river is no longer red here. In some stretches, the riverbed is exposed due to water diversion. The men in the car say the river once held rich fish stocks, but there are few fish after dam building.

As we ascend the mountain, the temperature cools. It is a three-hour drive from Nansha, the Yuanyang County capital, located in the valley, to our mountain village destination. A new highway under construction will reduce the time, which excites the driver, Mr. Li.<sup>1</sup> The new road will make transport of agricultural products from the mountain to buyers in the lowland faster and might also attract more tourists to the villages, he says. The famous Duoyishu Rice Terraces<sup>2</sup> draw many tourists, and villagers run guesthouses and restaurants close to scenic viewpoints.

However, the Duoyishu Rice Terraces are on a mountain adjacent to the one we ascend now, which sees very few tourists. Mr. Wang, who sits in the back of the car, cultivates corn, which he feeds his pigs, chicken, pigeons, and ducks and uses to make fiery corn liquor. He makes a batch of one hundred liters of corn liquor at a time and sells it to tourists and buyers from the lowland, especially around the Chinese New Year holidays. The liquor business earns him 20,000-30,000 RMB a year, and he figures that more tourists to the villages could increase his sales.<sup>3</sup>

In our private talks, however, Mr. Wang is not as excited as Mr. Li about the changes that development projects and processes

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Hani language belongs to the Lolo-Burmese branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Most young Hani in Yunnan also speak Chinese, and the research for this essay was done in Chinese.

<sup>1</sup> All names and some factual details have been altered to assure anonymity for the interlocutors featured in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> The Duoyishu Rice Terraces were carved on steep mountain slopes over the past 1,300 years, and were listed as an UNESCO Heritage Site in 2013.

<sup>3</sup> The exchange rate was approximately 1 Chinese RMB to 0.16 USD and 0.12 EURO at this time.

bring to his village. For example, the completion of a new, paved road has led villagers to abandon their houses to build new ones next to the new road. The new houses are constructed partly with borrowed money. Most young village residents leave for the cities in lowland eastern China to labor for the money needed to pay off their loans. Their children are left behind with their grandparents in the village. Moreover, prospects of economic mobility embedded in development processes could intensify farming, animal husbandry, mining, construction, and pollution on the mountain. In turn, this is likely to harm local ecologies and thereby also impact local cosmologies that make sense of these ecologies.

Based on my engagements with Wang from 2013 to 2018, the following ethnographic essay considers how livelihoods, development processes, ecologies, and cosmologies can be mutually conditioned. Wang's accounts are assembled into a narrative that presents his positioned perspectives. It should be noted that highlighting the perspectives of other interlocutors, such as Zhou, would have created a different narrative account. Focusing primarily on one interlocutor's subjective experiences may impede formal generalization compared to ethnographic accounts based on the narratives of multiple interlocutors. However, the personal narrative approach ideally allows for a more in-depth rendering of that interlocutor's livelihood strategies and personal experiences as they unfold over time and in different environments.

While employing a descriptive ethnographic style, the essay points to asymmetrical power relations between lowland and highland populations in Yunnan. It also suggests that certain materials, such as those used in ritual worship, may help highland ethnic Hani villagers imagine cultural and ecological pasts in the face of changes in their communities and mountain environments.

## WILD CAPITALISM IN RUILI

I met Wang in 2013 in Ruili, a border town in the Dehong Prefecture of China's Yunnan Province, neighboring Myanmar. At that time, Wang worked for Mr. Zhou, a Han Chinese man, who operated a company that supplied Ruili's hotels, restaurants, KTVs, and

nightclubs with beer, wine, and hard liquor. In 2010, Zhou came to Wang's mountain village in Yuanyang to engage in a then-thriving gold mining business, which is how he met Wang. Zhou contracted miners, whose labor he leased out to mining companies. But the business venture turned out bad for Zhou, who left for Ruili, broke. In Ruili, Zhou set up an alcohol company, acquired loans and investments from different partners, and contracted workers with the promise of good salaries and learning experiences.

One investor was Zhang, a seventeen-year-old local girl from Ruili. Zhou first hired Zhang and two other local women to contact the owners of bars, restaurants, and KTVs in Ruili as potential buyers of his beer and alcohol brands. He also asked them to find suitable local premises to open a bar as part of the company. Zhou discovered that Zhang's paternal aunt was rich and had a soft spot for Zhang because her daughter had passed away, and he started to persuade Zhang to borrow money from her aunt to invest in the company. Zhou was well-spoken and persuasive, and he promised a high investment return because Ruili's entertainment industry was booming due to the cross-border jade trade, which brought many wealthy businesspeople to the border town. When I first got to know Zhang, she was reading a book that Zhou had given her. The book offered advice for self-development and how to do business in China. At that time, Zhang saw Zhou as a benevolent teacher who would help her gain practical business experience. Zhou's presentation of his alcohol company made her feel it would be a lucrative business.

Zhou eventually convinced Zhang to borrow 400,000 RMB from her aunt to invest in his alcohol company. Zhou also asked Wang to come to Ruili to work for him. Wang and Zhang are ethnic Hani, and they became friends in Ruili. They discovered that Zhang's 400,000 RMB had vanished from Zhou's company account. Wang felt it was despicable that Zhou would cheat a girl of her family's money and seek to restore her funds. Wang worked as a company driver, transporting liquor cases to clients around town and sometimes across the border to Myanmar on a three-wheeled motorbike with a truck bed. He put some money into Zhang's account when he received payment. Over time, Wang returned all

of the 400,000 RMB to Zhang. Zhou did not immediately find out. He was busy acquiring new loans. He made Wang fabricate fake receipts and account figures so that the company seemed to have plenty of capital and stock to be used as collateral for the loans.

At this time, Zhou was thin, had a crew cut, and was in his mid-forties. He often invited me to drink tea with him beside a carved teak-tree table in his company office. Zhou is from eastern China's Henan Province. He said he subscribed to four cardinal values that comprise the Han Chinese character and spirit; *renyi* 'benevolence', *li* 'etiquette', *zhi* 'wisdom', and *xin* 'genuineness'.

One evening he said, "We Chinese do not work as individuals. My company is like a family. I am like a tree with many branches," while clenching his fist. "In the West, you are individuals," he continued, putting his five fingers on the table. The principle was that a close-knit network of (fictive) family members, symbolized by the closed fist, is stronger than an assembly of individuals, as symbolized by the freestanding fingers. Zhou often complained that locals in Ruili "do not have culture," referring to an idealized Han Chinese high culture rather than everyday practices. "We Han Chinese help and teach the ethnic minorities," he said, "but some of them are very closed-minded. They have a lot of resources, but they don't know how to use them. Locals here are lazy," he continued, "but I hire locals so they can learn about business, and how to develop their thinking."

Zhou's narratives almost invariably began with him arriving broke in Ruili and working his way up in the local business world with stamina and perseverance. First, Zhou acquired a license to be the sole supplier of the Dutch beer brand Heineken in Ruili and then expanded with other imported beer, wine, and liquor brands. Soon he was employing a handful of staff. He then opened a bar with a forty percent stake, while Zhang and another local girl each owned thirty percent. But Zhou appropriated all the profits. He never worked at the bar but came by every night to drink beer and gave his friends and associates free beer. After a year, the bar closed in debt.

Several months later, Zhou told me about his mining venture in the Yuanyang Mountains. His friend had opened an

unauthorized gold mine there, and Zhou hired locals as miners. But after a conflict, the workers mutinied and took over the mine. Zhou did not specify the nature of the conflict or its aftermath.

While accessing Zhou's personal story and feelings was hard, I directly connected with Zhang and Wang. Through them, I could see an image of Zhou very different from the image he tried to project of a Confucian gentleman. "I do not want to give you a bad impression of Zhou," Wang once said. "Deep inside, I do not think he is a bad person. But Zhou is not happy. He does not communicate with the heart. He talks, but he does not listen. It is hard for him to get close to people."

I thought about how Zhou often raised his glass in a toast, saying, "To happiness," but Zhou did not look happy when he made that toast for happiness.

One evening, Wang came by my room looking tired. I asked him how he was, and he talked for three hours, describing the disappearance of Zhang's money from Zhou's company account and his work to retrieve it. Zhou blamed Wang for the company account being empty. He had not paid Wang his salary for months and said Wang must pay back the money he had put into Zhang's account.

Zhou threatened that his *hei shehui* 'black society' friends would hurt Wang. He had also called people in Wang's village in Yuanyang and told them that Wang had stolen his money. Finally, he threatened to hurt Wang's family if he did not pay off the debt or if he told anybody that Zhou's company had no money.

"I want to leave the company," Wang said, "but Zhou will not let me go. I know too much about his business. Zhou has big problems. He borrowed more than one million RMB from various loan sharks. But they do not know that Zhou borrowed money from other loan sharks."

Zhou seemed engaged in a dangerous game, borrowing money from one loan shark to pay off debts to another, and so on. For example, Wang told me that Zhou owed 600,000 RMB to a businessman in Ruili and that this man had threatened to cut off Zhou's hand if he did not return the money within a week. Desperate, Zhou asked for help from a local jade trader, who went to the businessman and said, "Harming Zhou will not get your

money back. Wait a bit. I'll give you a nice piece of jade. Keep it until Zhou pays back the money."

"Zhou even borrowed 400,000 RMB from his sister," Wang continued, "but he did not pay back the money, and his sister lost her house."

A few months earlier, Wang's wife had come down from the mountain village in Yuanyang to work in Zhou's company in Ruili. Zhou had promised to pay her 1,500 RMB monthly to clean and cook but had not yet paid her. After working hard for many months, Wang made his first trip home for the Chinese New Year. "I cannot even afford to buy clothes for my children," he lamented.

Also, Zhou's threats had gotten to him: "I am not afraid of Zhou," he said, "but Zhou says he will send the black society people to my village to hurt my family, so what can I do?"

Wang's account of Zhou's borrowing spree led me to recall how Zhou had tried to use me to back up his creditworthiness in the black lending market in Ruili. Zhou asked me to come to his company's office one night. When I arrived, he was seated by the tea table opposite a young man, who immediately began asking me: How long had I known Zhou? How did I know him? How would I characterize our relationship? What was my job? How much did I earn? I got unpleasant vibes from this man who revealed little about himself besides being from Fujian Province.

This young man then questioned Zhou about his alcohol business. Zhou talked about his clients and the characteristics of various imported alcohol brands while adding cultural capital to his persona with classical Chinese idioms. After a friend of Zhou's arrived, the Fujianese man asked him questions similar to those he had asked me and jotted down the replies in a notebook. Wearing sports clothing and flashing gold chains on his wrist and neck, the young man had the air of a member of the black society. He had a habit of picking blackheads from his facial skin and examining them before letting them fall to the ground, which annoyed me immensely.

Out of the blue, Zhou told the young man that he and I would open a bar together. As we had no such agreement, I said, "Yes, Zhou will take care of all expenses, and I will manage the bar."

Zhou laughed nervously, but the young guy replied gravely, "But Zhou has no money. That is the problem."

Zhou said that he had encountered problems in his business and that some staff had stolen money from the company. Zhou mentioned Wang and Zhang's names. I was getting fed up and said I was tired and wanted to go home. The young man offered to drive me.

On the way back to my hotel, the young Fujianese man stopped the car, turned to me, and asked: "What do you think about Zhou?"

I tried to state my position subtly but clearly: "I don't know Zhou well enough to say," but the Fujianese man pressed the issue: "Do you think Zhou is a good man or a bad man?"

I again replied, "I don't know Zhou well enough to say," and continued, "But I know Zhang and Wang well, and I think they are good people. Do you understand what I mean?"

This was a way to subtly dissociate myself from Zhou, who had told the Fujianese man that he and I were close friends. The Fujianese man's inquiry about my earnings indicated that I could be held accountable if Zhou failed to return the loan. Zhou had implicated Zhang and Wang with losses in his company, and my saying they were good people undermined the trustworthiness of that statement. The Fujianese man nodded and said, "I understand what you mean."

When I told Wang about that incident back in my room, he revealed that Zhou had attempted to borrow 500,000 RMB from the young man representing a group of loan sharks from Fujian Province. He also said Zhou had asked him to do things that he felt were wrong in his heart. For example, a previous employee allegedly stole money from Zhou's company. Zhou had asked Wang to take this man across the border to Myanmar, tie him up, and steal his passport to make him pay back the money he had allegedly stolen. Wang had declined, and the employee disappeared.

A few days later, Zhou asked Wang to come by his office. Suddenly he hit Wang in the face twice and shouted that Wang did not do his job well. Wang accepted the blows because he feared that Zhou would hurt his wife, who was with him in Ruili if he fought



back. Wang worked for sixteen hours a day, and he was exhausted. At night, he could not sleep because he was thinking about how to escape from Ruili. "Zhou can manipulate me because I am not a local here, but he is afraid to harm Zhang because her family is from Ruili. He is afraid to mess with the locals. I am from a mountain village, and my wife only speaks Hani. What can we do against Zhou? He has *guanxi* 'social connections' here."

I wondered what had happened to the money Zhou had borrowed. Wang mentioned one of Zhou's business schemes that had gone awry. Zhou had learned that a *shuiniu* 'water cattle' sold for 2,000 RMB in Myanmar but could fetch 10,000 RMB in China. So, Zhou bought 1,000 water cows in Myanmar with a partner and arranged to import them without paying import taxes. But the cargo got stopped at a police checkpoint after the border crossing to China. The water buffalos had not been registered or cleared, and Zhou had to return them. Wang did not know how much money Zhou lost but guessed it was substantial.

This incident could be viewed in light of China's broader pattern of bilateral economic relationships. As China's economy and domestic consumer market develop rapidly, raw materials, including agricultural products and biological assets like livestock, are imported from economically less developed neighboring countries like Myanmar. At the same time, processed goods like mobile phones and motorbikes are exported. China's national borderlands provide opportunities for entrepreneurs to profit from price differences between goods on each side of the national border. Some businessmen, like Zhou, try to cut costs on import taxes by attempting to transport undeclared goods across the border. Smuggling of jade, illegal wildlife, and drugs is notorious along the China-Myanmar borderlands. Whether these businessmen succeed depends on factors such as their access to capital, powerful social connections, and knowledge of the local terrain.

FIG 1. Border gate between Ruili, China, and Muse, Myanmar (Ruili, September 2013).



I suggested I ask Zhou to give Wang his salary and let him leave Ruili. After all, Zhou had tried to present himself as a morally

solid man and seemed to care about my perception of him. However, Wang did not want me to confront Zhou as this would reveal that Wang had confided in me. "Then it will end in a bloody mess," warned Wang.

A month later, when Zhou went to Myanmar to investigate new business opportunities, Wang and his wife escaped from Ruili and returned to their mountain village in Yuanyang. A week after their escape, a car with four men stopped in front of Wang's village house. Zhou had sent these black society men who demanded that Wang pay them 300,000 RMB.

Wang's wife invited them inside to drink tea. Meanwhile, Wang went upstairs to fetch two rifles he used for bird hunting. Here, he also phoned some of his friends in the village and asked them to come to his house. When Wang and his friends threatened the black society men, they left the village. After that, Wang did not hear from Zhou or his associates again. While Wang had little power in the lowland, the mountain was his home turf, and Zhou's lowland power did not apply.

## LIVELIHOODS, DEVELOPMENT, AND COSMOLOGY IN THE YUANYANG MOUNTAINS

In 2018 at Wang's home in the mountain village of Yuanyang, I opened a bottle of French red wine that I had brought for our reunion, and Wang and I talked.

Wang heard that Zhou had left Ruili and set up a new company that recruits workers for highway construction in Kaiyuan, around five hours from here. Given his track record, we speculate that this latest business venture might also go awry.

Wang is happy in the village but worries about his wife, who is alone in Guangzhou, around 1,300 kilometers east of here. She works as a sewing machinist in a factory that produces bags, earning nine RMB per hour, amounting to 2,500 RMB a month. It is not a lot of money, but it is difficult for her to get a higher salary or find a better job because of her limited Chinese. In addition, both of Wang's parents are ill and cannot work. The family is self-sufficient in food, but Wang's parents need medicine, so Wang and

his wife must bring home money.

Wang recently returned to the village after working for three months picking mangoes in Hainan Province. The job was hard because he labored under the sun all day long. He shows me the sunburn scars on his hand.

There were many snakes at the plantation in Hainan. Sometimes the workers killed a boa constrictor, mixed its blood in alcohol, and added the meat to a soup. Like several other (in some cases endangered) animal species, some snakes are believed to have beneficial medicinal properties in *Zhongyao* 'Traditional Chinese Medicine'. Pythons and venomous snakes are in the hills surrounding Wang's village in Yuanyang. Wang says there were tigers and bears here thirty years ago, but they have disappeared as more extensive forest areas have been cleared. Both tigers and bears are used in Traditional Chinese Medicine, and poaching puts certain highland animal populations here at risk of extermination.

Some borderland areas near Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar host markets for illegal wildlife trade in Yunnan. Consumer demand has risen in conjunction with China's economic development. Endangered and protected animals are expensive, and certain wealthy businesspeople consume rare animal products and give them as gifts to flaunt their wealth. As cultural factors like local perceptions of health and social prestige may thus negatively impact biodiversity, increasing consumer awareness is an important step toward conservation.

Wang plans to start a business raising organic chickens on an uphill plot. First, he will need to build hen houses and fence the area where the chickens would live, free to roam and eat the vegetation within the enclosure. Wang thinks elderly people and children would benefit from feeling they contribute to the household economy by caring for the chickens while the young people labor in the cities. Wang has estimated that he needs at least 1,000 hens and can sell the organic eggs for one RMB apiece.

Wang needs to pay for the official certification that his animal products are organic. He also considers selling organic smoked pork meat, a local delicacy. Traditional Hani houses here feature an open hearth in the center of the main room. Above the

fire, families hang pork legs which are smoked for a long time. The smoked pork is consumed during festive occasions and when special guests visit. If Wang acquires enough money, he would also like to raise *huangniu* 'yellow cattle', but as demand is high, they cost up to 10,000 RMB per animal now (2018).

Wang would like an attractive logo and packaging for his animal products, and he figures he will need help with marketing from someone from the lowland who knows the market better. He thinks this business could be profitable because there is a rising demand for organic food among lowland urbanites. He says, "What we grow and eat here on the mountain is clean. We don't use chemicals and pesticides."

Wang's father tells me he never drinks bottled water or eats processed foods because he is convinced they would make him ill. He consumes only what they cultivate, raise, collect, hunt, and fish on the mountain. Nevertheless, piles of plastic trash discarded in a nearby stream testify to the rising amount of processed goods consumed on the mountain. Wang's father says there used to be many fish here, but gold mining activities have polluted the nearby stream, where there are now few fish.

FIG 2. Rice fields (Yuanyang, May 2018).



Almost all young villagers who go to urban centers in eastern China do manual work. Wang's friend, Mr. Li, had just returned from working in Guangzhou and Fuzhou for three months. "Manual work is very bitter," he says, "I usually do construction work, but I take whatever I can. We work for long hours and get very tired. I send half of my salary to my family and spend the other half on living expenses. I earned around 10,000 RMB a month. It's a good salary."

Li has around 1,000 tea trees on mountain plots near the village. Some of the trees are more than a century old. The tea has a characteristic earthy, slightly bitter taste. He sells the tea leaves to buyers from Pu'er City, who market it as Pu'er tea, which has become a famous brand name after a sharp rise in demand in the early 2000s from especially Hong Kong, Guangzhou, and Taiwan. Some buyers from Beijing and Guangzhou came to the village to buy tea, but Li did not want to sell it to them: "Their hearts are not clean. We are ethnic people, and our hearts are clean, but people from the cities try to cheat us. They offer us very low prices. We sell our tea to intermediaries here in Yunnan, with whom we have *guanxi*. Some tea we keep to drink ourselves. We do not want to sell it. Our tea is good for your health. It is like Chinese medicine."

Li's family is one of the most prosperous families in this village of ninety-two households. They live in a newly constructed three-floor house next to the new asphalt road. Unlike most houses here, his home features hot and cold running water, a refrigerator, and a washing machine. Li has also bought a car and speaks enthusiastically about the new road and the construction of new houses next to it that began seven years ago. The local government urges villagers to build new houses here and provides economic supplements, depending on household income. The supplements do not cover the costs of the building materials. The household can borrow the rest of the money from the bank. Many households have thus become indebted. Wang says this is one reason young people leave the village to work in cities.

During my visit, a house is being built in the village. Most villagers participate in the construction. Women carry mortar in big bags to the construction site, where men pour it onto inlaid iron

bars and then lay down bricks to build walls on top of the foundation. Some elderly men cook a skinned dog and a pig's head in a large wok for a communal meal in the evening.

A dual system of authority and governance is at work in the village. An administrative village leader communicates and implements government policies and participates in distributing government funds. Villagers can apply for government loans for weddings and even travel expenses related to migrant labor. The administrative village leader, a Communist Party member, must be able to read and write Chinese. Consequently, the village has elected a younger man. The village also has an elderly *longtou* 'dragon head'. A ritual specialist, the dragon head recounts events and information dating far back in history, including where the villagers' ancestors came from, their migration route to this site, and their cultural rules and taboos. He also must set an example for other villagers and should not have committed crimes. His tasks include telling and improving the fortune of newborn babies and performing rituals to keep harmful events away from the village and improve the harvest. Also, he uses *fengshui* 'geomancy' to decide the place and time for opening new fields and celebrating weddings. The dragon head will choose a young man as his apprentice and successor. But these days, most young men do not understand the language of the dragon head, and some villages cannot find young men to take over this role.

After asking the dragon head for permission, Mr. Li takes me to the village's ritual site, where only men are permitted. It is in a forest clearing near a stream, considered auspicious, uphill from the village. Li emphasizes that the downhill flow of water is crucial to mountain life. Hani villagers place split bamboo tubes in water streams at different locations in the mountain to make taps of freshwater conveniently available for passers-by to drink.

Trees are also important on the mountain because they prevent soil erosion and flooding during heavy rainfall. The ritual site features a *longshu* 'dragon tree' worshiped during ritual events. The dragon tree at the old ritual site was over one hundred years old, but due to the construction of the new road, villagers relocated the ritual site to this site three years ago and planted a new dragon tree. During Chinese New Year, male villagers *kowtow* ('kneel') to

the dragon tree. At this time, they slaughter a pig whose jaw is tied to the dragon tree. This way, they can see how many years they have lived at this location and worshipped that tree. The ritual site also features a stone carved as a tiger and worshipped in ritual events. Ideally, carving the stone into the shape of a tiger prevents wild boars from entering the site and gnawing the dragon tree. The boar fears the tiger, so the dragon tree is protected.

Mountain inhabitants are ethnically differentiated along a vertical axis. Ethnic Han and Dai live in the valley, ethnic Miao live uphill, and the Hani people live furthest up the mountain. Li says Hani can marry other ethnic groups, but this rarely occurs because their cultures and customs differ. To illustrate, Li points to how the main room of Hani villagers' houses features a sacred space with pictures of ancestors used for ancestor worship. Women are not allowed to enter this space. Before being buried, the dead are placed in this space for one or two days, with leaves placed in the eyes, ears, and mouth to prevent the spirit from leaving the body. Li takes me to a newly built three-floor concrete house. The house does not feature a fireplace inside, and Li says it does not look like a Hani house. But the house does have the space for ancestor worship. "They must keep this space; otherwise, they would not be Hani people," he laughs. Li says the Miao people do not worship ancestors as the Hani people do, so he feels the two groups are incompatible in marriage.

Mountain areas of Yunnan's neighboring countries display a similar pattern of ethnic differentiation along a vertical axis. The language and culture of Hani in Yunnan are similar to that of mountain-dwelling Hani (Akha) in northern Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. The language and culture of valley-dwelling Dai in Yunnan are similar to that of Shan in Myanmar, Tai in Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and so on. Cross-border marriages among ethnic 'cousins' from neighboring countries in these border areas are not uncommon.

Later, Wang takes me to the old village where he grew up. The village was abandoned after villagers built houses closer to the new road. While Li thinks the construction of the new road and houses creates a more modern living environment and new



economic opportunities in the village. Wang feels the housing and environment in the old village were better than their new housing. Wang also points to how this process creates debts that force parents to leave their children in the village while working in lowland cities.

Furthermore, intensified farming, mining, and dam construction may impact biodiversity and ecologies in this area. The relocation of the village ritual site closer to the new road raises questions about how development processes may impact how the Hani people in this village construct the material-cosmological topography of the mountain they reside on. Hani villagers' accentuation of the physical and symbolic importance of water, trees, and animals on the mountain emphasizes that local ecologies that sustain people's livelihoods also guide their cosmologies. We have seen that the tiger still plays a central symbolic role as a worshipped protector at the local site for ritual worship, although it no longer roams in these mountains.

FIG 3. Some of Wang's pigeons (Yuanyang, May 2018).



## LOWLAND-HIGHLAND DYNAMICS AND DEVELOPMENT PROCESSES IN YUNNAN

In this essay, I have relayed the narratives Wang shared as I followed him from a lowland border town to a mountain village in Yunnan. Aiming to convey the quotidian complexity of Wang's mobile livelihoods in the context of development processes, I have eschewed theoretical analysis. Experiences of developmental processes are contingent upon the livelihoods and positions of different actors. My long-term engagements with Wang allowed me to designate him as the protagonist of this essay. Taking the perspectives of, for example, Zhou or Li would have created different accounts that might have presented developmental processes in Yunnan more positively, or at least differently. I glean two main lessons from this ethnographic account that regard lowland-highland dynamics and development processes respectively in Yunnan.

First, the relationship between Zhou and Wang, as described in the first part of this essay, highlights how power and economic opportunities are often unequally distributed among lowland and highland populations in Yunnan. A Han Chinese from the lowland, Zhou acquired *guanxi* and capital that allowed him to position himself as a middleman between mining companies and local miners in Yuanyang, between alcohol companies and clients in Ruili, and between construction companies and laborers in Kaiyuan. From northeast China, Zhou speaks *biaozhun* 'standard' Chinese and routinely reeled off a studied repertoire of classical Chinese idioms that signified to some locals in Yunnan that he had cultural capital associated with Chinese high culture.

With the benefits of language, connections, and guile, Zhou acquired millions in RMB loans in Ruili. In contrast, as a mountain farmer with no education beyond secondary school, it was difficult for Wang to establish *guanxi* with powerful people or get a high-paid job in the lowlands.

Wang's wife speaks only the Hani language, which consigns her to low-salary jobs. Wang's family's land in Yuanyang has gold deposits, but the family lacked the connections and capital to

exploit them fully. Wang's family had done artisanal mining for years, but the local government had recently closed villagers' mining pits while leasing concessions to companies with industrial machinery. The development of new roads and houses now brings specters of modernization and economic mobility further up the mountains in Yunnan. However, these developments encourage villagers to go into debt, which is one reason many leave their children in the village while they undertake migrant labor in lowland cities.

Some highlanders I met in Yunnan told me that people from the lowlands take advantage of their 'clean hearts', as Li put it. On the mountain, we went to a downhill waterfall for a picnic. Wang walked into a hut and asked the family for salt and a machete to cut bamboo. The ethnic Miao family gave him the articles and a piece of smoked pork. Wang did not know the family, but he said it is customary on the mountain to provide visitors with what they need, regardless of ethnicity. This 'highland sharing mentality' operates on a different exchange logic than the market relations that significantly impact lowland urban sociality. Zhou lived as a guest in Wang's house in Yuanyang for six months during his gold mining venture. Wang might have expected to be similarly treated as Zhou's guest in Ruili. Instead, Zhou hired Wang and his wife as low-paid employees, withheld their salaries, and threatened Wang to keep him compliant in an environment where neither legal nor social sanctions were available to Wang.

Zhou was skilled at drawing people into his *guanxi* network and using them instrumentally, as his attempt to use me as 'face' to acquire a loan in Ruili's black moneylending market illustrates. Zhou's businesses exemplify a 'wild capitalism' that flourishes when laws are not strictly enforced. This is perhaps now most visible in China's national borderlands. Previously considered backward peripheries, many of these borderland areas are becoming spearheads for China's global ambitions, manifested in cross-border infrastructure, trade hubs, and Special Economic Zones as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. For entrepreneurs, these development processes offer new economic opportunities stratified according to factors such as access to investment capital and

powerful social connections.

Secondly, this essay has described how development processes may impact livelihoods, ecology, and cosmology in a highland Hani village in Yunnan. The construction of dams creates hydropower that fuels industrialization and development in Yunnan. New infrastructures like roads, railways, and Special Economic Zones connect wider areas and more people and facilitate trade. A new road to Wang's village will make transporting his highland produce to the lowland faster. Traditional highland ways of farming and animal husbandry without chemicals and pesticides are becoming an asset, as food scandals and health anxieties create rising consumer demand for 'clean' food in lowland urban areas. Packaging his animal produce as 'organic' thus provides new economic opportunities for Wang. In urban lowland Chinese imaginaries, the mountain, in some respects, represents a natural, traditional, and authentic space, not only for social forms and communities not wholly guided by market relations but also for 'clean' ecology and food production.

Meanwhile, the same development processes and technologies may impact this 'clean' mountain ecology and the livelihoods and cosmologies that are intimately tied to it. Dam building and gold mining reduce fish stocks in the rivers, and the rising consumption of processed goods on the mountain creates inorganic litter that pollutes the rivers. Also, some animals like tigers, bears, and snakes that have roamed these highland ecological 'refuges' have become endangered due both to intensifying farming and to poaching that caters to a consumer demand that is driven both by perceptions of their medicinal properties and their value as rare and expensive consumer goods.

Traditional Hani cosmology has been influenced by the ecologies of the mountains they have resided on. The Hani people recognize the importance of water streams, trees, and animals to their livelihoods, manifested in the material-symbolic position and composition of their traditional site for ritual worship. As prospects of economic mobility and more 'modern' lives gain a foothold among Hani youth especially, their traditional cosmology tied as it is to the ecology of the mountain will likely be reshaped to

accommodate their changing livelihoods and physical mountain environments. Material objects such as the carved stone tigers and dragon trees at their ritual sites might become archaic remnants that serve as mnemonics for Hani villagers' imagining of a past world that is transforming.

## NON-ENGLISH TERMS

biaozhun 标准, Standard Chinese

Dai 傣, ethnic Dai people

Dehong 德宏, Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province.

Duoyishu 多依树, Duoyishu Rice Terraces. UNESCO Heritage Site in Yuanyang County, Yunnan Province.

*fengshui* 风水, geomancy

*guanxi* 关系, social connections

Han 汉, ethnic Han people

Hani 哈尼, ethnic Hani people

*hei shehui* 黑社会, black society, mafia

Honghe 红河, Red River; Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province

*huangniu* 黄牛, yellow cattle, category of Chinese cattle

Kaiyuan 开远 City, Yunnan Province

*kaixin* 开心, happiness, an expression used in toasts

*ke tou* 磕头, to kneel and touch the forehead to the ground as a token of homage, worship, or respect

Li 李, an ethnic Hani farmer in Yuanyang who did manual labor in eastern China.

*li* 礼, etiquette

*longtou* 龙头, dragon head, Hani ritual specialist

*longshu* 龙数, dragon tree, planted at ritual sites in Hani villages

Miao 苗, ethnic Miao people

Nansha 南沙, the administrative seat of Yuanyang County in the Honghe Hani and Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Yunnan Province.

Pu'er 普洱 City in Yunnan Province

*renyi* 仁义, benevolence

Qinghai 青海 Province, PR China

RMB 人民币, renminbi, national Chinese currency

Ruili 瑞丽 City, Yunnan Province

*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族. Ethnic minority

*shuiniu* 水牛, water cattle, category of cattle

Wang 王, an ethnic Hani man who farmed in Yuanyang and worked  
as a driver in Ruili

*xin* 信, genuineness

Yuanyang 元阳 County, Yunnan Province

Yunnan 云南 Province, PR China

*zhi* 智, wisdom

*zhongyao* 中药, Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Zhou 周, a Han Chinese man who did business in Yuanyang, Ruili,  
and Kaiyuan